

Volume I

# LIFE SPARKS

LIFE STORIES TO  
ILLUMINATE, INSPIRE AND IGNITE



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“Until you cross the bridge of your insecurities, you can’t begin to explore the possibilities.”  
~ Tim Fargo

## Crossing Bridges

SUSAN GREIF

The fairy tale, “Three Billy Goats Gruff,” tells the story of three billy goats trying to cross a bridge to get to the other side—where the meadow is green and plush. However, there is a fierce and cruel troll underneath the bridge who threatens to “gobble them up” as they cross.

So it goes... the first and smallest goat persuades the troll to wait for the next goat who is bigger—and he safely crosses the bridge. Then, the medium-sized goat persuades the troll to wait, once again, because the next goat is even bigger! The troll also allows him to cross. At last, the largest goat comes to the bridge and the ravenous troll jumps on the bridge to devour him. Unfortunately for the troll, the largest goat was huge, and attacks the troll, tossing him over the bridge. As the troll plunges downstream, the largest goat confidently crosses the bridge.

We all have bridges to cross, what we do with the challenges faced in the crossings are our choice. I’ve had my share of bridges, with plenty of trolls underneath. My hope, in sharing my story is that I can encourage an easier bridge crossing for you. □

I remember it well...I began dental school, but quit the day after orientation. My dream of becoming an accomplished doctor came to a quick end in just a matter of hours. Why? □

I was raised by traditional parents who survived the horrors of the Holocaust. My parents questioned my choice. “Why do you want to put your hands in someone else’s mouth?” □

In the meantime, I had also become engaged. Not feeling I could do both, I struggled to make a choice: either focus on my career choice and studies, or focus on marriage and family.

I contemplated my choices for weeks before dental school began. I cried each night with anxiety. On the one hand, I wanted to be an independent, modern woman, yet having been raised by traditional parents; I agonized over the pressure of their strong convictions. They felt, and wanted me to feel, that a woman's place was in the home, to cook, clean and raise children. I silently questioned myself: Was I choosing the male-dominated field of dentistry to quietly rebel against the traditional roles my parents wanted me to pursue?

I weighed my excuses to get out of dental school: Would I have to delay having kids so I could work with formaldehyde infused cadavers? And if I chose to have kids after dental school, would I ever want to return to dentistry? I concluded, dental school wouldn't work, not then anyway.

Instead, over the next seven years, I got married, birthed four children and lost both of my parents. I believe there is a reason for everything in life, and I had no regrets staying home and raising my family, until...

One day I turned to my oldest child, then eight-years-old, and asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up. She responded, "I want to be a mommy and do nothing like you." That not only felt like a dagger in my heart, but brought with it the regrets of deep desires left behind—a twisted, stabbing reminder of the part of me that never expressed itself.

Suddenly, I knew I had to do something more, outside the home, that stood out as more important, to be a strong role model for my daughters. The classes I had been taking in dance, drama, art, writing and photography, were no longer enough to satisfy my doing and learning, or how my daughters perceived me and my role as their mother.

As timing would have it, my local temple created a mission to help the Albanian refugees located in Macedonia during the Balkan War. With my husband's support, I joined the group and brought my camera with me. A reporter from the Bergen Record, who was on the mission with us, told me if I captured any great photos, he would publish them.

Fortunately, I chose to document our entire journey. With camera in hand, I photographed the emotions that exuded from the war-torn older faces and the innocent youthful faces—the faces told more than words. The camp, run by an Israeli group, used art, music, dance, and play to aid expression and healing for the displaced Muslim refugees.

The Universe has a way of guiding us. But if we don't pay attention, we miss out. I came home, developed my colored, and my black and white photos, which were published in local and foreign newspapers, and in *Lifestyle Magazine*. I was thrilled!

In addition, my photos were displayed at a few art shows, including a museum and a New York City Gallery, with proceeds going to an Albanian group who helped the refugees. The accolades my photos received helped me feel happy and alive—and accomplished.

My real life photographic art was not my husband, not my children; it was authentic expressions of me and my heart. Thinking I had found my calling, I turned to my husband and told him, "I want to be a photo-journalist and travel the world."

My husband, the realist, asked me, "How can you do this with four children, under eight, at home?" He was right. I felt another dream squelched. I resumed my mother-at-home position, following my mother's traditional role. It wasn't a question of my immense love for my husband and children, but there was a creative need within me that they couldn't fill.

When my kids began full school days, I missed time with them. And I felt another void that led to depression. My days seemed empty, so I pursued creative self-healing activities that challenged my mind and body—yoga, meditation, and energy healing. This began an introspective journey that drew me closer to discovering a new creative calling and life purpose. I knew somewhere there was work that would bring joy, and make me feel more complete and accomplished. I soon had an epiphany that came from my love of photography, as well as the healing arts I had learned!

Standing in the darkroom at the International Center of Photography, I watched my black and white images slowly emerge on the paper, as they floated in the developing solution. In no time, the majestic George Washington Bridge became prominent.

This image was part of a series of photos I had taken: images of bridges, windows, doorways, archways—and other images seen through open spaces. My professor walked over to peek at my photo. She examined it, and asked, “What are you waiting for? What do you need to do to get to the other side?”

It made me wonder: How does she know I am trying to figure that out? Because in reality, I was trying... *yearning*... to cross the bridge where I could discover my life’s creative purpose on the other side.

Talking this over with a friend, she suggested I apply to the New School in New York City. They offered a certification in creative arts therapies. I considered it. And I also considered going to graduate school to get my masters in Art Therapy, so I contacted some of the New York graduate schools and inquired about the pre-requisites. I was disappointed to learn that all of the undergraduate psychology classes I took in college were obsolete—all would have to be retaken, as well as many of my art classes taken earlier.

Still raising my children, I knew I would have to take my undergraduate class work part time. It would take years! I questioned myself: What if I didn’t like art therapy after all? I gave up on the notion of returning to grad school—or pursuing the certification in art therapies.

A few years later, while crying through one of my depressive periods, my husband turned to me and said, “I know what will make you happy... if you worked with children at Bet Elazraki (a children’s home in Israel). You could do art work with them.”

A light bulb clicked. My heart shot up in response... it felt exactly right. Finally, I decided to apply to the New School’s Creative Arts Therapies (CAT) Program, two years after my friend had first suggested it.

I sat in class knowing that I belonged there. Surrounded by other right-brained people, I was able to create and make neural connections to everything taught. I felt like that annoying kid in the back of the room waving her arm up in the air, gesturing “Ooh, ooh, pick me” or “I know the answer, hello-oh, can’t you see my arm?”

During the CAT program at the New School, I interned at the Hudson Guild in Manhattan. I worked with three- to four-year-old children. There was a cute little blond girl who didn’t speak, she only grunted and used her body to deflect those classmates who bothered her. Being the mother that I was, I used the skills I was taught from the speech therapist who worked with my children, to see if the little girl could hear, process the information and speak. She was able to.

Eventually, I had her repeat the word and create its action. In time, the little girl finally spontaneously asked me, “Can you wash my hands?” That was the gift we gave each other.

I was so excited for her, and happy to know I was able to make a change in this little girl’s life. Her teacher asked me to work one-on-one with her, even though certification interns are prohibited from doing so. After I began, I learned that she had immense fears.

Upon reviewing her records, I read that she was diagnosed with selective mutism; there was an order of protection against her father. We acted out her fears. Teaching her empowering tools, she began to say “no” to those classmates who bothered her, and asked for help from the teachers.

It felt fabulous to have a gift to help her and others. I became so passionate about what I did that when I approached my bridge, the one I knew I had to cross, I no longer felt threatened by the troll, or the negative self-talk,

that seemed to sabotage me and keep me from crossing before.

Amazed—I finally concluded that all my knowledge and experiences had finally integrated into my purpose in this life: being a wife and a mother of four; and with my studies

and learning in science, psychology, art, dance, drama, writing—I was integrating a multi-sensory approach to learning. Those, along with the wellness therapies, yoga and energy healing that I practiced were finally being put to good use.

*I had become the largest billy goat!* I had finally crossed the bridge, leaving the bothersome troll behind! I became a published photographer, illustrator, and now, an author. I learned to take control of the inner critic by confronting it. The result is inner strength and wisdom—and new found self-love and self-respect that keep me walking confidently forward.

It took many years, but I am living a purposeful life. My business, Art Mends Hearts, LLC, is a unique multidisciplinary approach to help and healing that empowers women and children to cross over their bridges, and overcome self-imposed hurdles.

There will always be bridges, with threatening trolls underneath them—your negative self-talk, or inconvenient circumstances, or one excuse or another; those things that try to prevent you from taking that first step, and each step thereafter. Are you ready to cross your bridge? What's holding you back?